

Perspectivism and Conciliation in the Reading of Plato's Dialogues.

Perspectivismo e Conciliação na Leitura dos Diálogos de Platão

Abstract

In recent decades, a growing number of scholars have questioned the developmental approach to Plato that dominated scholarship during the 20th century. In this context, old strategies of reading the dialogues have been renewed and new approaches proposed. Basically, three different reading strategies the dialogues have been advocated: the still dominant Developmentalism, Unitarianism, and the Literary (or Dramatic) reading. These different approaches are still largely taken as competitors and there seems to be no methodology available that systematically integrates these different readings. In this paper, I work upon the "Perspective reading" proposed by Kahn (2005), and Gonzales (2016) in order to present a methodology that integrates some aspects of these different approaches in a systematic and coherent way.

Key-words: Plato; Literary Form; Perspectivism; Dialectic.

Resumo

Nas últimas décadas, a abordagem desenvolvimentista da obra de Platão, que dominou a academia durante o século XX, tem sido progressivamente questionada. Nesse contexto, antigas estratégias de leitura dos diálogos foram renovadas e novas abordagens, propostas. Basicamente, três estratégias de leitura dos diálogos foram defendidas: a, ainda dominante, leitura desenvolvimentista, o unitarismo e a leitura literária (ou dramática). Essas diferentes abordagens ainda são amplamente consideradas como concorrentes e parece não haver metodologia disponível que

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integre essas diferentes leituras. Neste artigo, desenvolvo a “leitura de perspectivista” proposta por Kahn (2005) e Gonzales (2016), a fim de apresentar uma metodologia que integre aspectos importantes das três abordagens acima citadas de maneira sistemática e coerente.

Palavras-chave: Platão; Forma literária; Perspectivismo; Dialética.

1. Introduction

The perspectivist reading, at least in the way I see it, is not an innovative approach to Plato's work in the sense that it proposes a revolutionary interpretation or a new understating of the platonic philosophy. In the end of this paper, I will conclude with a few words on the relation between the perspectivist reading and the content of the platonic philosophy. But I would like to stress at this point that the theses I am going to put forward in this paper represents what I take to be the right way of reading a dramatic literary text with philosophical content such as the platonic dialogues. In this sense, perspectivism is just a methodology of reading Plato, not an innovative interpretation of his philosophy. And If any innovative understanding of Plato's philosophy emerges from this way of dealing with his texts, it should be considered and judged apart form the methodological theses I will be defending here.

My starting point would not deserve mention if not for the fact that many of the greatest interpreters of the 20th century surprisingly disregard it: Plato decided to present his thought in a very complex dramatic frame in which a great number of dramatic personae interact and every dialogue make reference to other dialogues either by the reappearance of the same character(s) or by the reoccurrence of the same themes and philosophical problems¹. These are internal fundamental aspects of the platonic *opera* and to disregard them should be considered as worrying as disregarding one of the platonic arguments. Because of that, I take as extremely appropriate the definition of perspectivism provided by Kahn (2005, p.159) and Gonzales (2016, p. 33), according to which perspectivism is the methodological recognition that the

1 “He [Plato] makes any reader work so hard to see what it is that he is up to – what he is using his characters to say, or in other words what he wants the reader to extract from his text. Studiously (it seems) leaving himself off the list of speakers on every occasion, or at least not appearing in person, he leaves us to guess where to locate his voice” (Rowe, 2007, p.2)

dramatic framework of the dialogues, the occasion of the conversation and the character of the interlocutors are all conditioning factors for the arguments, theories, and doctrines presented by Plato.

This definition represents the acceptance that due to the literary nature of the platonic text, each phrase, argument or theory presented in the dialogues is shaped to fit a specific dialectical context. Because of that, a correct understating of any argument should take into account the character who formulates it, the dramatic frame of the conversation, and the dialectical context of its enunciation. Each one of the platonic characters represents a different perspective on the issues debated, and each one of them argues from his own point of view, according to the specific features of the dialectical confrontation in which he is engaged.

As we now know, these aspects of the platonic text tend to be disregarded by those who are still operating under the developmental paradigm dominant in the last century (cf. Cornford, 1927; Guthrie, 1975; Vlastos, 1991). Since these interpreters tend to frame each dialogue in a pre-established narrative of discovery and development of the Theory of Forms, inconsistencies on the treatment of a given topic are not explained by the internal features of the platonic text, such as difference between dramatic settings or variation in conversational context. Rather, these authors tend to explain discrepancies by external considerations about the supposed state of mind of Plato at the time he wrote this or that specific dialogue. So, for example, the fact that Socrates does not explicitly mention the transcendental nature of the Forms to Ion is not explained by the peculiarities of the platonic text, such as Ion's apparent incapacity to understand such a topic, or the lack of a conversational opportunity for Socrates to explain the intricacies of his metaphysics in his conversation with the poet, but rather by some hypothesis about the stage of development of the Theory of Forms in Plato's mind. It is not necessary to mention that such endeavor is very tricky and could only be accomplish if we had a reasonably reliable chronology of composition for the platonic *corpus*, what the last fifty years of scholarship seem to have proved impossible to achieve (cf. Matoso, 2016).

2. Synchronism

In diametrical opposition to this risky methodological gambit, one of the most important characteristics of the perspectivist reading is its emphasis on the irreducible diversity of the dialogues. In this respect, perspectivism is close to the literary (or dramatic) reading, that interprets each dialogue in its

singularity, and takes in consideration for the analysis of each and every argument the peculiarities of the dramatic frame in which the argument is embedded. This kind of reading was first proposed by Grote, and is becoming increasingly popular nowadays. As Grote explains it, this type of interpretation refuses to sacrifice the inherent diversity, and separate individuality of the dialogues, to the maintenance of a supposed unity of type, style or propose:

“In fact, there exists for us, no Personal Plato any more than there is a personal Shakespeare. Plato (except in the Epistolae) never appears before us, nor gives us any opinion as his own: he is the unseen prompter of different characters who converse aloud in a number of different dramas - each drama a separate work, manifesting its own point of view, affirmative or negative, consistent or inconsistent with the others, as the case may be.” (my italics). (Grote, 1875, p.339).

Adopting a terminology inspired by Sausurre (cf. Sausurre, 1972, p.119-138), I will call the singularity of each formulation of an argument, theory or doctrine within the dialogues its *synchronic* aspect. In this sense of the term, Grote and other supporters of the literary reading would be focusing their interpretation of the platonic dialogues on the synchronic analysis of the text.

For the synchronic analysis of an argument only the immediate context of its enunciation is important. Fortunately, the dramatic nature of the platonic text provides us with clear limits of what is the immediate context of a given argument, and that is the conversation in which it is presented. Every platonic dialogue were written to be an independent, self contained piece of philosophical literature. So, for the synchronic analysis of the *Gorgias*, for instance, there is no point in asking if the socratic anti-hedonism of this dialogue presupposes, anticipates or is consistence with the hedonistic theory of the *Philebus*. In other words, only the meanings the term ἡδονή receives *within* the *Gorgias* are important for the synchronic analysis of this dialogue, and the interpretation of these meanings should not be reduced or submitted to any external narrative about Plato’s biography or conceptual development.

It is important to stress that this immediate independence of each one of the platonic dialogues is not just an editorial convention, it is a feature carefully designed in the dialogues by Plato himself. Plato decided to write dialogues that can be read and understood independently, as well as he decided to leave us without any all-encompassing narrative that clearly subordinates

one argument to another or plainly indicates which dialogue represents his final word on a given theme².

As stressed by Grote, the formal structure of the Platonic *corpus* is just a set of theories without any definite indication of which one is the final or true account:

“In so far as I venture to present a general view of one who keeps constantly in the dark - who delights to dive, and hide himself, not less difficult to catch than the supposed Sophist in his own dialogue called *Sophistês* - I shall consider it as subordinate to the dialogues, each and all, and above all, it must be such as to include and acknowledge not merely diversities, but also inconsistencies and contradictions.” (Grote, 1875, p. 340)

The formal structure of the dialogues as a whole is also the formal structure of each dialogue in particular, the *Symposium* being the most paradigmatic case. Within the *Symposium* there is no definite indication of which discourse is the right one about Eros. It is part of the reader's task to figure out what is the correct understanding on Eros the dialogue intends to convey. And it is certainly an oversimplification to think that Plato intended his readers to see in Socrates's speech the whole truth on the subject, all the others speeches being just literary games without philosophical relevance (cf. Nietzsche, 1864 *apud* Gonzales, 2016, p.32).

As exemplified by the *Symposium*, just like there is no all-encompassing narrative subordinating one dialogue to another, there is no clear indication of which argument or theory within the limits of a single dialogue that should be considered relevant or should be discarded as totally absurd. Unquestionably, Socrates and the other main-speakers have an inherited priority on this matter. But the dialogues are full of philosophically relevant arguments, images, and theories introduced by non-protagonist characters. Or would someone say that Meno's paradox (*Men.* 80d-81e) or Protagoras's myth (*Prot.* 320b-323a) are not part of the philosophical content of these dialogues?

2 Of course he could have done differently; he could have represented Socrates in the *Phaedo* saying something along these lines: “In the past I thought that the human soul was tripartite, but I was wrong. Now, I know that the human soul is an absolute unity, just like the Forms”. So, the simple fact that we do not have any clear textual subordination of one dialogue or argument to another indicates the importance of not undermining one dialogue, argument or formulation to any other.

In fact, the very dialectical nature of the platonic arguments forces the reader to carefully consider everything that is said by the characters, in order to decide, on the one hand, which argument is the most strong and, on the other hand, what elements of the other weaker arguments should be taken as right or at least philosophically significant. That is not to say that everything everyone says in a platonic dialogue is to be considered true or even part of the true. The reader witness a confrontation of many perspectives on a given subject, and the dialectical confrontation in itself provides her with an objective criterion for which perspective to follow. However, just like in real life, sometimes even the wrong person has a good point to make.

Grote's remarks are strikingly up to date, and they express an understanding about the platonic text that is, unfortunately, disregarded by most of the greatest interpreters of the last century, such as Cornford, Guthrie and Vlastos. However, they seem to me to tackle only half part of the problem. For if it is true that the dialogues were conceived to be independent, self-contained pieces of philosophical writing, it is also true that Plato's work is full of intertextual references. Every single dialogue points to other dialogues, either by its dramatic frame or by the reoccurrence of themes and characters. Again, these intertextual references are not just accidents that are due to the dramatic nature of the dialogues. These are textual features carefully designed by Plato. Because of these references, the nature of the platonic text yields, not only a synchronic analysis, but also a diachronic analysis.

3. Diachronism

The aim of the diachronic analysis is to integrate different arguments and theories in search for the underlying unity or deep philosophical structure that relates them. The diachronic analysis represents the methodological acknowledgment of the great amount of intertextual connections relating the dialogues. It tries to embrace the fact that the platonic text is full of cross-references, and that each dialogue represents a different investigation on the same (more or less well defined) set of philosophical problems. Therefore, the diachronic analysis must accept the diversity of the dialogues without presupposing that this variety in literary expression represents fundamental changes in Plato's philosophy. Since the perspective reading aims to provide not only a synchronic analysis but also a diachronic analysis of the dialogues, it also has affinities with Unitarianism, such as vindicated by Schleiermacher in his *Introduction to the Dialogues of Plato* (1836).

According to Schleiermacher, the philosophy of Plato “can only be understood by an ability duly to estimate the pervading presence of a purpose in the connexion of his writings” (1836, p. 6). The interpreter’s task is, therefore, to restore the dialogues to their natural connection, “so that while every dialogue is taken not only as a whole in itself, but also in its connection with the rest he [Plato] may himself be at last understood as a Philosopher and a perfect Artist.” (1836, p.14).

Schleiermacher’s confidence in the internal coherence of the platonic *corpus* is so strong that he claims to present the dialogues into a logical order by means of which “every detail with the doctrines therein contained becomes intelligible” (Schleiermacher, 1836, p.8). Hence, in his view, the literary diversity of the dialogues works for a preconceived scheme, so that eventual inconsistencies or contradictions operate together for the explanation of a single, coherent philosophical view.

Schleiermacher proposition, however, is open to the same criticism scholarship usually presents against developmentalists, such as Guthrie and Vlastos. All of them want to frame every dialogue into an external narrative about Plato that is ultimately unverifiable. In doing that, they also tend to obliterate the singularity of each dialogue, giving great importance to passages of the text that fit well into their narrative while neglecting the passages and arguments that do not fit (cf. Fronterotta, 2007). According to the terminology I propose, these authors tend to reduce the synchronic aspects of the text to their diachronic analysis. And they do that by imposing an external, all-encompassing narrative over the interpretation of each and every independent argument of Plato.

However, in analogy to what Sausure postulates to Linguistics, the diachronic analysis represents a second level of interpretation, and should never be used to overwrite synchronic elements (cf. Sausure, 1972, p.127-138). In the case of Plato, all we have is an unorganized succession of independent, self-contained dialogues³, and the deliberate lack of a textual indication of what is Plato’s final position suggests us to look for connections without subordinating one dialogue or argument to another. In this sense, diachronic

3 Of course there are some textual evidence clearly connecting some dialogues to others by dramatic frame, for instance the trilogy *Theatetus-Sophistes-Politicus*. In fact, most part of the dialogues can be arranged in a dramatic sequence beginning with the young Socrates of the *Parmenides*, and ending with his death in the *Phaedo* (cf. Benoit, 2015; Zuckert’s, 2009). In spite of that, there is no evidence that this dramatic chronology must also be the correct order of reading or interpreting the dialogues. Benoit and Zuckert’s confidence in a pre-established order of reading is what mostly differentiate their methodological approach from mine.

aspects cannot prevail over synchronic aspects, but must be conceived as a theoretical unity *under* the different arguments and theories.

4. Analyses

The examination of a couple of passages from the dialogues will help me illustrate how I think synchronism and diachronism should interact in the analysis of Plato's arguments. To begin with, I will address a very short fragment from the *Gorgias* (460a5-b7):

S. Hold it there you're speaking well. If ever you make anyone a rhetor, he must know the just and the unjust things, either previously, or else later, learning them from you.

G. Quite.

S. Well now; is someone who has learnt building a builder, or isn't he?

G. Yes, he is.

S. And isn't someone who has learnt music a musician?

G. Yes.

S. And isn't someone who has learnt medicine a medic?

And in other cases by the same account (κατὰ τοῦτον τὸν λόγον) isn't the man who has learnt each of these things such as his knowledge makes him?

G. Quite.

S. Then according to this account isn't also the man who has learnt just things just?

G. Certainly.

{ΣΩ.} Ἔχε δὴ· καλῶς γὰρ λέγεις. εἴανπερ ῥητορικὸν σύ τινα ποιήσης, ἀνάγκη αὐτὸν εἰδέναι τὰ δίκαια καὶ τὰ ἄδικα ἥτοι πρότερόν γε ἢ ὕστερον μαθόντα παρὰ σοῦ.

{ΓΟΡ.} Πάνυ γε.

{ΣΩ.} Τί οὖν; ὁ τὰ τεκτονικὰ μεμαθηκῶς τεκτονικός, ἢ οὐ;

{ΓΟΡ.} Ναί.

{ΣΩ.} Οὐκοῦν καὶ ὁ τὰ μουσικὰ μουσικός;

{ΓΟΡ.} Ναί.

{ΣΩ.} Καὶ ὁ τὰ ἰατρικὰ ἰατρικός; καὶ τᾶλλα οὕτω κατὰ τὸν αὐτὸν λόγον, ὁ μεμαθηκῶς ἕκαστα τοιοῦτός ἐστιν οἷον ἢ ἐπιστήμη ἕκαστον ἀπεργάζεται; {ΓΟΡ.} Πάνυ γε.

{ΣΩ.} Οὐκοῦν κατὰ τοῦτον τὸν λόγον καὶ ὁ τὰ δίκαια μεμαθηκὼς
 δίκαιος;
 {ΓΟΡ.} Πάντως δήπου.
 {ΣΩ.} Ὁ δὲ δίκαιος δίκαιά που πράττει.
 {ΓΟΡ.} Ναί.

In this short passage, we see Socrates presenting the following argument to the great sophist Gorgias:

- (1) *whoever has learnt building (τὰ τεκτονικὰ) is a builder (τεκτονικός).*
- (2) *whoever has learnt music (τὰ μουσικὰ) is a musician (μουσικός).*
- (3) *whoever has learnt medicine (τὰ ἰατρικὰ) is a medic (ἰατρικός).*

This principle is now generalized:

- (4) *whoever has learnt a particular subject has the quality conferred by the knowledge of that subject (ὁ μεμαθηκὼς ἕκαστα τοιοῦτός ἐστιν οἷον ἢ ἐπιστήμη ἕκαστον ἀπεργάζεται).*

From this generalization follows:

- (5) *whoever has learnt justice (or the things relatives to justice — τὰ δίκαια) is just (δίκαιος).*

The proof of course does not hold; the induction (4) on which it is based has no justification whatsoever in the dialectical context of the *Gorgias*. It depends on assumptions that Gorgias has no reason to accept, and which have not yet been proved in the argument so far. Because of that, we must conclude that the argument is a sheer fallacy in its synchronic aspects.

However, a frequent reader of the dialogues will recognize that the induction (4) is justified by the Socratic doctrine that knowledge alone is a sufficient condition for virtue. This doctrine is not argued for by Socrates in his conversation with Gorgias, but it is put forward by the same character in other dialogues (cf. *Prot.* 345e, 360d; *Men.* 88b-89a; *Lach.* 198c-199d; *Carm.* 173a-d). In this regard, the diachronic analysis shows that, from Socrates' point-of-view, the argument is sound.

Speaking somewhat loosely, then, our hypothetical proof is either fallacious or valid, depending upon one's point of view. The point of view of Gorgias does not support a diachronic analysis, since this character does not appear in other dialogues. Socrates' perspective, on the other hand, can

be accessed through the employment of tacit premises and doctrines he expounds in other places within the platonic *corpus*.

In this case, synchronic and diachronic analyses provide us with two different understandings of the same argument, and both of them should be considered right. In order to correctly evaluate the conversation depicted in the *Gorgias* it is necessary to see that Socrates is here using a fallacy against the sophist. However, the diachronic confrontation with other dialogues gives us access to a second level of interpretation, in which the same argument is not a fallacy, just an enthymeme.

The validity of the argument is determined by the perspective of the characters, and there is no final answer to the question about its soundness. The distinction between synchronic and diachronic analysis allows the reader to see that the same passage supports different levels of interpretation without one of them being subordinated to the other.⁴

I want to move now to a more general case. Consider, on the one hand, Socrates' exposition of the theory of Forms in the *Phaedo*, and, on the other hand, his search for the definition of Piety in the *Euthyphro*. In the first case, we see Socrates using the term εἶδος to describe the eternal, separate Form⁵, while in the second case we find the same Socrates using the same word to refer to the aim of his search for definition⁶. As we know, these two uses of the term are very different in their synchronic elements. They are so different that we usually translate εἶδος in the *Euthyphro* as "aspect", while rendering the same word as "Form" in *Phaedo*. Nevertheless, as in the last case, the diachronic confrontation suggests a theoretical unity underlying these expositions.

If we give the right attention to the dramatic fact that the same character employs the same word εἶδος in both dialogues, it becomes clear that, from Socrates' point of view, the εἶδος he is looking for in the *Euthyphro* is very

4 Klosko (1983) discusses the same argument. Since he aims to establish criteria for the identification of fallacies and sophistry in the dialogues, he reaches the following conclusion: "The most important limitation is that the commentator cannot introduce material into some proof that takes him beyond the point of view of Socrates' interlocutor." (Klosko, 1983, p. 370). My claim is that we can introduce material from other dialogues *precisely* to go beyond the point of view of the interlocutor, and to access Socrates' perspective. However, we must acknowledge that in doing so we are moving from a synchronic to a diachronic interpretation of the passage in question.

5 "the Form itself (αὐτὸ τὸ εἶδος) has a right to the same name through all time." (Phd. 103e3)

6 "Now call to mind that this is not what I asked you, to tell me one or two of the many pious acts, but to tell the essential aspect (ἐκεῖνο αὐτὸ τὸ εἶδος), by which all pious acts are pious" (Euth. 6d9-11).

intimately related to the separate Form of the *Phaedo*. In fact, there are many signs that Socrates is speaking about the same topic in both dialogues. In the *Euthyphro* Socrates says, for instance, that the “essential aspect” (εἶδος) he is searching for is a παράδειγμα (*Euth.* 6e4). And he presents a whole argument (10a1-11b5) to explain that not even a good nominal definition of the word “piety” would do for him, since he is looking for the οὐσία of piety, the cause of piety in every pious thing (11a7).

In the *Phaedo*, on the other hand, Socrates introduces the Forms (εἶδος) with a clear reference to the definitional quest of early dialogues, such as *Euthyphro*:

“Our argument now does not concern the equal more than the beautiful itself (αὐτοῦ τοῦ καλοῦ) and the good itself (αὐτοῦ τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ) and just and pious and, as I say, it concerns all those things on which we set this seal of the “what-it-is” (τὸ “αὐτὸ ὃ ἔστι”), both in the questions that we ask and in the answers that we give’ (75c10–d3)

οὐ γὰρ περὶ τοῦ ἴσου νῦν ὁ λόγος ἡμῖν μᾶλλον τι ἢ καὶ περὶ αὐτοῦ τοῦ καλοῦ καὶ αὐτοῦ τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ καὶ δικαίου καὶ ὀσίου καί, ὅπερ λέγω, περὶ πάντων οἷς ἐπισφραγιζόμεθα τὸ “αὐτὸ ὃ ἔστι” καὶ ἐν ταῖς ἐρωτήσεσιν ἐρωτῶντες καὶ ἐν ταῖς ἀποκρίσεσιν ἀποκρινόμενοι

That the Forms of the *Phaedo* represent an answer to the so called “socratic question” of the early dialogues is known at least since Burnet⁷. Now, the problem is: how to explain the differences in presentation? Why Socrates use the same word εἶδος in so different manners?

Usually, interpreters address these questions by subordinating one formulation to the other in regard to an external, ultimately unverifiable narrative. Developmentalists explain the variance identifying each dialogue to a different step in the process of development of the Theory of Forms in Plato's mind. For Allen (1984), for example, the definitional quest of the *Euthyphro* represents a *proto* Theory of Forms, in which the word εἶδος still signifies an

7 Burnet's comments on the *Euthyphro*: “The words εἶδος and ἰδέα would not naturally have been chosen to express a pure logical relation, and the occurrence of παράδειγμα below (6e4) indicates that the developed doctrine is assumed by Socrates. (...) the terms ἰδέα, εἶδος, and παράδειγμα are used here [in the *Euthyphron*] exactly as they are in the later dialogues. The view that they are not is only an attempt to bolster up the hypothesis that neither Socrates nor Plato in his earlier writings knew anything about the Ideas” (1924, p. 31); Burnet's on the *Phaedo*: “[N]or is there any justification in Plato's writings for contrasting Socratic λόγοι with Platonic εἶδη” (1911, p.99).

immanent aspect, but is already about to become a separate Form⁸. Dorion (1997), widening the gap, sees no element of the Theory of Forms in the uses of εἶδος in the *Euthyphro*⁹. But the most radical position among developmentalists is certainly Vlasto's conception that the Socrates of the *Euthyphro* and the Socrates of the *Phaedo* "pursue philosophies so different that they could not have been depicted as cohabiting the same brain throughout unless it had been the brain of a schizophrenic." (Vlastos, 1991, p. 46). In Vlasto's narrative, the Socrates of the first dialogues represents the historical Socrates, while the Socrates of the middle-dialogues represents Plato, and these two are irreconcilable.

In opposition to that, unitarianists consider that the doctrine of the middle-dialogues "can be traced with full clarity in the earlier dialogues." (Jaeger, 1944, p.152). For them, the variance in the use of εἶδος is just the reflection of a preconceived order of philosophical exposition. In Shorey's words: "The Platonic Socrates, under cover of an ironical profession of ignorance, (...) prepares the way for a more serious analysis" (Shorey, 1910, p. 6).

Finally, literary readings do not make the mistake of imposing an external narrative or preconceived scheme over the dialogues, as both unitarianism and developmentalism. But literary readings avoid this mistake at the expense of tracing any relation between the dialogues, proposing at the end of the day a sort of atomistic reading. I consider this a price too high to be paid¹⁰. Specially because, in our case, it is the same character Socrates who uses the same word in the two different contexts.

The aim of a perspective reading is to conciliate these uses of the word εἶδος without reducing one of them to the other, but understanding both of them as equally valid perspectives on the same problem. In each case, the use of εἶδος is determined by the dramatic context in which it is embedded. In the *Phaedo*, Socrates is talking to his most familiar friends, people who are certainly acquainted with the tenets of his philosophy, and therefore able to receive specialized information on the nature of the Forms. The occasion of

8 "There is a theory of Forms in the early dialogues, and it involves a metaphysical claim, but it is not *the* theory of Forms—that theory of the choir of heaven and the furniture of earth found in the *Phaedo*, *Republic*, and other middle dialogues." (Allen, 1984, p. 38)

9 "Toutes ces caractéristiques, constitutives de la théorie des formes intelligibles son absentes de l'*Euthyphron*. (...) L'*eidos* de la piété est une forme distinctive, (...) mais à cet *eidos* n'est attachée aucune des dimensions ontologiques et épistémologiques de la théorie des formes intelligibles. (Dorion, 1997, p. 211)

10 See Shorey's criticism (1910, p. 7-9).

his death, as well as the willingness of his audience, gives Socrates the opportunity for long expository speeches on many fundamental aspects of his theory, specially those related to the immortality of the soul and the metaphysical reality of the Forms. Euthyphro, on the other hand, does not seem to have any previous knowledge of Socrates's speculations on Forms. Because of that, and other dramatic features of this specific conversation, Socrates and Euthyphro engage themselves in the search for the definition of piety, an important topic for both characters.

There is no point in saying that the definitional quest of the *Euthyphro* is just a step toward the theory of Forms of the *Phaedo*. The "theory" of definition we find in the so called "socratic dialogues" is as much a part of the platonic doctrines as any other exposition from the *Phaedo*. They represent different perspectives on the same group of problems, in this case the nature and function of the εἶδος. These perspectives are both irreducible and mutually illuminating; we understand better the *Phaedo* reading the *Euthyphro*, and *vice-versa*, but we do not *need* one of them to understand the other.

3. Conclusion

In the above examples, synchronic and diachronic aspects interact to create different levels of reading, each level corresponding to the perspective of a character. There is no justification for Euthyphro to understand εἶδος as a platonic Form, but Socrates gives us reasons to think that he is talking about the same topic in both dialogues. There is no justification for Gorgias to take Socrates' argument as sound, but the experienced reader can see that, in Socrates' perspective, the argument is valid. In these two instances, the unity between different theories and arguments is established by the textual fact that the same character expounds them. But there are other characters in Plato's dialogues. Should we look for a underlying unity between the Eleatic Stranger's method of division, and Parmenides's dialectical exercise on the One, for example?

I think we should, since in these cases we have a thematic unity. All the Platonic protagonists discuss the same set of philosophical problems. Actually, the fact that we have many characters with similar approaches discussing the same range of problems is just another indication that we must relate their theories without losing sight that there is no definite, final formulation. Timaeus, the Eleatic Stranger, Socrates, Parmenides, and even the Athenian are all thinkers with the same general understanding about the philosophical

problems they discuss. This general understanding is what we call platonism. Nonetheless, there is no ultimate philosophical champion between them. There is nothing in the platonic text justifying the choosing of one theory over the other or the election of any particular formulation as the absolute truth on the matters their discussed. Rather, the dialogical form, the lack of clear order of reading, and the use of multiple protagonists indicate that the different formulations should be taken as different perspectives, all of them philosophically relevant, all of them part of the true. The platonic philosophy cannot be captured by any of these formulations, but must be searched under all of them, as a general understating about reality or a more or less specific set of philosophical positions.

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